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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on several issues in school desegregation that stem from recent changes in demography, policy, and research. Change in student diversity, the first consideration, is even more marked in cities than in the country as a whole, with only 9 of 47 urban cities in the Great City Schools network having a majority white enrollment. There have been changes in national desegregation policies as well as voluntary desegregation through school choice. The recent influx in immigrant children has brought into new focus the potential conflict between school desegregation and bilingual education as children whose native language is not English have needed to be grouped together for instruction, or integrated into mainstream classes without native language instruction. As the 1954 suit, Brown v Topeka Board of Education claimed, racial balance does appear to affect achievement. The systemic inequities of segregated schools are a reason why resources and school effectiveness issues have joined racial balance as aspects of desegregation politics. (SLD)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

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THE CHANGING FACE OF RACIAL ISOLATION AND DESEGREGATION IN URBAN SCHOOLS

During the past decade much has changed in the nation's demographics and housing patterns, as well as in its commitment to school desegregation. Although educators in many cities still work hard to ensure that their schools are as desegregated as possible, others have abandoned the goal of desegregation, arguing that the cities have become too racially segregated to make school integration feasible, or that enforced desegregation has only exacerbated white flight.

This digest focuses on several current issues in school desegregation that stem from recent changes in demography and policy, and research. Although the digest cannot answer the complicated legal, political, and educational questions about desegregation in the 1990s, it can help to inform the debate.

Changes in Student Diversity

Since 1980, eight million immigrants have arrived in the U.S., bringing two million students into the nation's schools. These newcomers have changed American schools from biracial to multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual institutions. While the percentage of non-Hispanic whites has dropped significantly, both the percentage and ethnic diversity of nonwhite students have increased. Non-Hispanic white students constituted 76 percent of all public school students as late as 1976, but by 1986 they comprised just over 70 percent. At the same time, the percentage of black students remained about the same, Hispanic students increased from 6.4 percent to almost 10 percent, and Asians increased from 1.2 to 2.8 percent of all students. Despite the continuing small numbers of Hispanics and Asians relative to whites, the increase was almost 45 percent for Hispanics and 116 percent for Asians in just ten years (Ogle, Alsalam, & Rogers, 1991).

Inside the major cities, the racial and ethnic composition of school children changed even more significantly during this period. Already predominantly minority at the beginning of the decade, between 1980 and 1990 the proportion of central city public school students who were African American, Hispanic, Asian American or Native American increased from 66.6 percent to 75 percent. Today, over a third of all racial/ethnic minority children are in public school in the nation's major cities. Only nine out of the 47 urban districts in the Great City Schools network have a majority white enrollment (Casserly, 1992).

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Changes in National Desegregation Policies

Since the mid 1980s, several Federal decisions and policies have effectively taken the teeth out of school desegregation compliance. Most conspicuously, the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice began efforts to end busing in Norfolk, Savannah, Oklahoma City, Seattle, and elsewhere (National Research Council, 1989). In addition, in January 1991, in a pivotal desegregation case, *Oklahoma City v. Doyle*, the Supreme Court ruled that formerly segregated school districts may be released from court-ordered busing once they have taken all "practicable" steps to eliminate the legacy of segregation. According to the Court, school districts are not responsible for remedying local segregated housing patterns, as long as these patterns are the result of private choices and are not themselves "vestiges" of the era of official school segregation (Greenhouse, 1991).

Nevertheless, many urban schools remain involved in some form of court or government intervention to desegregate. Nearly all the plans, whether voluntary or court-ordered, are system-wide and include all grade levels. Plans in five cities involve the surrounding suburbs (Casserly, 1992).

Yet, the picture provided by the rare researcher studying desegregation across the nation has not been optimistic. Two of the few recent desegregation studies report the increased isolation of black students in Southern districts (Orfield, Monfort, & Aaron, 1989), and national social trends that "seem to augur sharp increases in resegregation" (Taeuber, Smock, & Taeuber, 1990, p. 28). Moreover, segregation appears to be worse for Hispanic than for African American students. In 1986, more than 70 percent of Hispanic students, compared with 64 percent of blacks, were enrolled in schools that were more than 50 percent minority; almost a third of Hispanic students were in schools more than 90 percent minority (Haycock & Duany, 1991).

Voluntary Desegregation through School Choice

Across the country, the tendency these days is to use magnet schools and various forms of "controlled choice" to create voluntary desegregation. However, research suggests that there are severe limits to what school choice can accomplish. The strongest evidence against choice comes from a recent analysis of 20 school districts, which suggests that the level of segregation is most likely to be reduced, and a racial balance to be maintained, when desegregation is mandatory (Fife, 1992).

Magnet schools provided the original strategy for desegregation through choice. However, the question of whether the magnet strategy is viable is answered differently by different researchers. In a study of a number of districts, Rossell (1990) argues that magnets are successful desegregation tools because they offer the "carrot" of excellence and special programming. A study by Metz (1986) of three magnet schools in a large city suggests more ambiguous lessons. According to Metz, by making magnets implicitly superior to regular schools, the school system created a situation where no one had to go to an inferior school (defined by race and class) just to bring about desegregation. However, contrary to publicity, it was not the magnets themselves that desegregated the city's schools, but the closing of central city schools and the bussing of black children to white schools. In fact, the role the magnet schools played was to cause "a small amount of reciprocal movement of whites" and, as important, to "distract" the city from the fact that desegregation was occurring (p. 207).

A recent study of a court-ordered voluntary transfer plan in St. Louis (Wells, 1991) makes vivid the limits of "choice" in creating desegregated schooling for black students. This research demonstrates that, given the choice to attend either segregated urban or predominantly white suburban schools, African American urban parents do not necessarily chose a predomi-

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nantly white school for their children; nor do they make "rational" choices based on what might be the best education for their children, even when transportation to suburban schools is free. Indeed, while some parents and students may actively choose an all-black (and under-resourced) school, a sense of powerlessness and alienation may cause many to "choose not to choose," by default keeping their children in the neighborhood school, or even enrolling them in schools they believe to be inferior. Thus, only a small percentage of black families who could be involved in voluntary desegregation choose to be.

The fact that parents do not necessarily choose schools on the basis of educational quality is supported by Metz (1986). Although one magnet in Metz's study had little distinctive about it, it developed the longest waiting list, simply because "many middle-class and ambitious working-class parents sought a school where their children would be with children of the highest social class and achievement level possible" (p. 208). In fact, as Metz argues, racial desegregation, "or at least racial integration—a social environment in which the races mix easily as social equals—seems to be the most easily compromised aim" among magnet schools (p. 130).

Desegregation and Bilingual Education

Recently, the great influx of immigrant children has brought into new focus the potential conflict between school desegregation and bilingual education, as children whose native language is not English have had to be placed either in language segregated environments or integrated into mainstream classes without the benefits of special language instruction. While some districts have sacrificed desegregation goals to teach language minority children, others have subordinated native language instruction to desegregation.

In fact, the conflict between desegregation and bilingual education goals is one more of theory than of practice. Hispanic students are enrolled in increasingly segregated schools, at the same time as the majority of language minority students receive no special education. In 1986, more than 70 percent of all Hispanic students attended schools that were 50 percent minority, and almost a third of all Hispanic students were in schools that were 90 percent minority (Haycock & Duany, 1991). Yet, in the mid 1980s some 68 percent of eighth grade and 82 percent of eleventh grade language minority students received neither bilingual nor English as a Second Language instruction (Valdivieso, 1986).

Desegregation and Achievement

As the 1954 suit, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, claimed, it appears that racial balance does affect achievement. Segregated schools are more likely than predominantly white schools to be financially under-resourced and educationally inferior, as measured by pupil/teacher ratios, advanced curricula, computers, laboratory equipment, etc. (Taylor & Piche, 1990). That is, school-based achievement differences reflect not only the race (and poverty) of their students, but "fundamental inequities between districts serving predominantly poor and minority students and districts serving more affluent and more largely majority students" (Orland, 1990).

An analysis of the performance of high school students in Dade County shows how both higher expectations and better resources may turn into school-level differences. Dade County students in predominantly white schools have the highest average test scores, and those in predominantly black schools score the lowest (Portes & Gran, 1991). Moreover, both Hispanics and Asians perform more poorly in predominantly black schools than they do in predominantly white ones—that is, even non-black students are affected by the school differences. The point is, as Portes and Gran argue, the differences in test scores in the various Dade Country schools are not caused only by differences in student ethnicity, because, even after controlling for individual ethnicity and other factors, the differences persist at the school level. Something systemic about a school serving predominantly black, or predominantly white, students—covering both resources and expectations—contributes to the success or failure of all students who attend. These inequities are one reason why resource and school effectiveness issues have joined racial balance as aspects of desegregation politics.

— Carol Ascher

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